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Iraq Development Road Project and Corridor Politics

Abstract

This article examines the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP) through the theoretical lens of Corridor Geopolitics, arguing that the initiative reflects a pivotal strategic shift in Iraq's regional role—from a passive buffer state to an active transit hub. Although the IDRP primarily functions as a logistics corridor connecting the Grand Faw Port with Turkish and European markets, it simultaneously operates as a geopolitical instrument for asserting national sovereignty and projecting regional influence. Positioned as a counter-response to the exclusionary logic of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the IDRP reflects Iraq's engagement in a broader "corridor competition" transforming the Middle East. By advancing a new axis of connectivity through cooperation with Turkey and financial backing from Gulf states, the project directly challenges Iran's dominance over Iraq's transit routes. The study further highlights how Iraq's domestic political dynamics both shape and are shaped by the strategic ambitions embedded in the project.

Keywords: Iraq Development Road, Corridor Geopolitics, Regional Connectivity, Soft Balancing, Transit State

Irak Kalkınma Yolu Projesi ve Koridor Politikaları

Öz

Bu makale, Irak Kalkınma Yolu Projesi'ni (IKYP) "Koridor Jeopolitiği" kuramsal çerçevesinden inceleyerek, bu girişimin Irak'ın bölgesel rolünde —pasif bir tampon devletten aktif bir geçiş merkezi olma yönünde— yaşamsal bir stratejik dönüşümü yansıttığını savunmaktadır. IKYP, esas olarak Büyük Fav Limanı'nı Türkiye ve Avrupa pazarlarına bağlayan bir lojistik koridor işlevi görse de, aynı zamanda ulusal egemenliğin pekiştirilmesi ve bölgesel etkinin artırılması için jeopolitik bir araç olarak da işlemektedir. Hindistan-Ortadoğu-Avrupa Ekonomik Koridoru'nun (IMEC) dışlayıcı mantığına karşı bir yanıt olarak konumlanan proje, Irak'ın Ortadoğu'yu dönüştüren daha geniş bir "koridor rekabeti" sürecine dahil olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Türkiye ile işbirliği ve Körfez ülkelerinden sağlanan mali destekle yeni bir

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bağlantı eksenini geliştiren proje, İran'ın Irak üzerindeki transit hâkimiyetine doğrudan meydan okumaktadır. Çalışma ayrıca, Irak'ın iç siyasi dinamiklerinin bu stratejik hedefleri nasıl şekillendirdiğini ve aynı zamanda bu hedeflerden nasıl etkilendiğini de vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Irak Kalkınma Yolu, Koridor Jeopolitiği, Bölgesel Bağlantısallık, Yumuşak Dengeleme, Geçiş Devleti

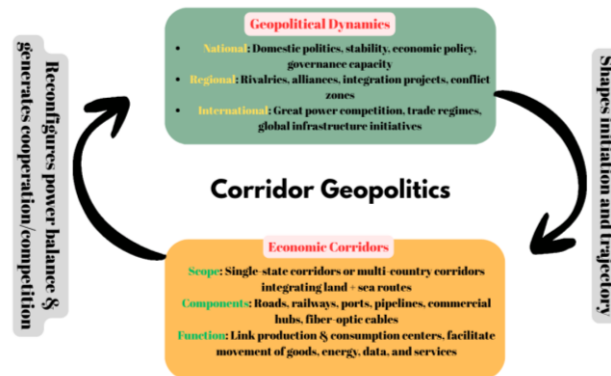
Introduction

An *Economic Corridor* (EC) refers to a designated geographic zone that connects economic hubs through coordinated infrastructure, trade facilitation, and policy alignment, with the primary goal of fostering investment, trade, and regional development. According to the Asian Development Bank (2023), ECs offer a multivectoral and multisectoral framework defined as:

"A spatial or area-based concept—a process of widening, deepening, and integrating economic activities in an identified area through integrating the provision of diverse hard- and soft-infrastructure, sound economic incentives to attract private firms and investments, development of (new) markets, and strengthened institutions and regulations to support increased economic activities and density" (Asian Development Bank, 2023, p. XX).

Although economic corridors are ostensibly developed for economic purposes, their strategic implications extend far beyond conventional definitions of economy—particularly if economy is reduced to the exchange relations between producers and consumers. In this context, the concept of “corridor geopolitics”, as proposed by A. Reisinezhad and Arsham Reisinezhad (2025), offers a more integrated understanding of the symbiotic relationship between economic infrastructures and geopolitical dynamics. Rather than functioning as neutral mechanisms of connectivity, corridors serve as arenas of geopolitical contestation and tools of strategic influence. They enable states to convert economic capacity into geopolitical leverage by shaping access routes, determining the nature of regional interconnectivity, and exercising control over critical geographical nodes. From this perspective, corridor geopolitics encapsulates a two-way relationship between infrastructure and political order. On the one hand, geopolitical dynamics such as domestic priorities, regional rivalries, and great power competition influence the development and direction of corridors. On the other hand, once operational, these corridors can reshape regional balances of power, modify patterns of economic dependence, and generate new frameworks for both cooperation and contestation. Therefore, economic corridors should not be perceived as mere conduits of trade but as *strategic terrains* where economic interdependence converges with geopolitical rivalry.

Figure 1. Mutual constitution of geopolitics and economic corridors. (Bidirectional dynamics of corridor geopolitics (as referred in continuation). (Scholvin & Wigell 2018, p. 1-12).



Carl Schmitt’s assertion that “economic antagonisms can become political, and the fact that an economic power position could arise proves that the point of the political may be reached from the economic as well as from any other domain” (Schmitt, 2016, p. 78) remains particularly relevant to the conceptualization of corridor geopolitics. Within this framework, regional connectivity initiatives are seldom neutral. Economic infrastructure, beyond facilitating trade and investment, often generates strategic influence, cultivates asymmetric dependencies, and becomes embedded in broader political rivalries. Schmitt’s thesis reinforces the notion that while the realm of politics ultimately governs questions of sovereignty and power, the domain of economics increasingly serves as a vehicle for political assertion—impacting the strategic behavior of both state and non-state actors. Connectivity corridors, in this sense, function not merely as trade routes but as instruments of influence and geopolitical leverage. Within this evolving geopolitical landscape, the central research question this study addresses is: how does Iraq’s Development Road Project (IDRP) interact with or challenge other emerging regional connectivity initiatives, notably the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?

The Development Road Project was conceived as a regional infrastructure initiative with the potential to offer an alternative economic corridor that is more inclusive for countries such as Iraq and Türkiye. Its formulation was, in part, a strategic response to the exclusionary tendencies of IMEC, which was announced during the 2023 G20 Delhi Summit. IMEC’s design aims to connect South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula with Europe, yet it notably bypasses key regional actors including Iraq and Türkiye. This raises questions regarding the political and economic implications of such exclusions, especially in the context of contested geopolitical space and overlapping spheres of influence.

Theoretical Framework: Corridor Geopolitics

A sound conceptualization of the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP) begins with a precise understanding of the term economic corridor. Traditionally, in development economics, a corridor is viewed as a linear aggregation of infrastructure components—such as roads, railways, and pipelines—intended to reduce trade costs and enhance regional integration. However, within the framework of corridor geopolitics, the term undergoes a significant semantic transformation. Rather than functioning as a passive noun (a route), it assumes the quality of an active verb—implying intention, control, and geopolitical assertion.

As Reisinezhad and Reisinezhad (2025) argue, corridors serve as geopolitical arenas where physical infrastructure represents only the visible layer—the "hardware"—of a broader political "software" coded by state strategies and ambitions. From this perspective, corridor designation is not merely a logistical decision but a geopolitical statement: by charting a particular route, a state implicitly asserts territorial control, political alignment, and strategic priorities. It communicates messages such as: “this area is stable,” “this zone falls within our sphere of influence,” or “this network links us with partner X rather than competitor Y.”

Within this theoretical framing, the IDRP emerges as both a discursive act and a developmental undertaking. The very rebranding of the project—from the technocratic label “Dry Canal” to the more ambitious “Development Road” (Kalkınma Yolu in Turkish)—suggests a deliberate shift in meaning and purpose. As Yılmaz (2024) points out, this redefinition emphasizes not only transit and connectivity but also nation-building, economic revitalization, and strategic reorientation within a contested regional order.

Technical and Strategic Dimensions of the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP)

The material dimension of the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP) is as ambitious as its strategic intent. Central to the initiative is the Grand Faw Port in Basra, currently undergoing a comprehensive expansion. In its initial operational phase, the port is projected to handle 3.5 million TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units), with long-term capacity planned to reach 7.5 million TEUs by 2050, following key development milestones set for 2028 and 2033. With a deep draft of 19.8 meters, the port is designed to accommodate ultra-large container vessels, positioning it as a direct competitor to established regional hubs such as the Port of Jebel Ali in the United Arab Emirates (Hasan, 2024).

Extending approximately 1,200 kilometers northward from Basra, the corridor encompasses multiple infrastructure layers. It comprises a dual-spine configuration featuring a dedicated highway system for heavy cargo transport, integrated energy conduits for oil and gas transmission, and a dual-use high-speed railway system, with operational targets of 300 km/h for passenger traffic and 150 km/h for freight. The corridor traverses key Iraqi urban and economic centers including Nasiriyah, Karbala, Baghdad, and Mosul, ultimately terminating at the Ovaköy border crossing with Türkiye.

Functionally, the IDRP is envisioned as a land-based alternative to maritime trade routes, particularly the Suez Canal. It is estimated that the route could reduce cargo transit time between East Asia and Europe by approximately 15 days compared to the Suez Canal and 20–25 days relative to the Cape of Good Hope route (Hasan, 2024). In this context, the term “Dry Canal” becomes particularly salient. Unlike maritime canals, which fall under international legal regimes such as freedom of navigation, dry corridors operate exclusively within sovereign territories. This gives transit states (e.g., Iraq) and gateway states (e.g., Türkiye) full authority over the movement of goods and actors within the corridor, effectively establishing a jurisdictionally closed system that is subject to bilateral or multilateral political arrangements.

Comparative Corridor Geopolitics

It is not possible to comprehend the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP) in isolation. Its strategic significance emerges only in comparison with other regional connectivity initiatives, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

IDRP vs. IMEC. The announcement of the IMEC at the 2023 G20 Summit was met with concern in Ankara and Baghdad, where some commentators interpreted it as an act of regional exclusion. According to Tamzok (2023), the proposed IMEC route connects Mumbai to the United Arab Emirates, continuing through Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Israel (Haifa), and Greece, while bypassing both Iraq and Türkiye.

In response, the IDRP offers a direct and continuous land bridge, as opposed to IMEC's reliance on a multi-modal transport system (sea → rail → sea), which may lead to increased handling costs and logistical friction. Goods transported via the IDRP remain on a single railway system from Faw Port to Europe, enhancing efficiency. While IMEC includes a political dimension

of normalization with Israel, the IDRP emphasizes logistical functionality and cost-effectiveness (Tamzok, 2023).

IDRP vs. BRI. Despite being perceived as complementary to China's Belt and Road Initiative—particularly the “Middle Corridor” through Central Asia—the IDRP presents a financial divergence. Rather than relying on Chinese state-backed loans, often criticized for contributing to debt dependency, the IDRP utilizes investments from Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar (Hasan, 2024). This financial model introduces a hybrid framework in which Chinese trade interests are facilitated through Gulf-funded infrastructure, reinforcing the sovereignty of transit states like Iraq and Türkiye.

Strategic Leverage and Regional Balancing Dynamics

Within Iraq, the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP) functions as a mechanism for recalibrating regional economic alignments. Historically, Iran has sought to position Iraq as a logistical extension of its own transit infrastructure, notably through the proposed railway link between Shalamchek and Basra. While this rail connection has received official approval from Baghdad, its intended use has been framed primarily around religious tourism—particularly the transportation of pilgrims to sites such as Karbala and Najaf.

In contrast, the IDRP has been conceived as a commercial corridor aimed at facilitating international trade and the movement of large-scale freight. By maintaining the distinction between religious and commercial transit, Iraqi authorities have effectively limited Iran's access to Mediterranean markets through Iraqi territory, thereby consolidating the strategic importance of the Grand Faw Port as Iraq's primary trade gateway.

Furthermore, the IDRP contributes to a regional architecture of economic interdependence. Major financial investments from Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar into Iraq's transport infrastructure, alongside Türkiye's reliance on the corridor for trade and energy connectivity, have the potential to increase regional stakeholders' interest in Iraq's domestic stability (Development Corridors Partnership, 2022). In this context, the presence of non-state armed groups—particularly those affiliated with regional actors—becomes a variable of international concern, as any disruption to the corridor infrastructure may invite broader geopolitical consequences.

The Ankara–Baghdad–Brussels Axis

The Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP) is of existential importance for Turkey. Following the announcement of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC),

President Erdoğan articulated a "Plan B" approach, underscoring Turkey's resistance to being relegated to the periphery of international trade (Tamzok, 2023). Through the IDRP, Turkey seeks to reaffirm its historical role as a key logistical and geopolitical bridge between the East and the West. The project also offers significant diversification opportunities for the European Union. As the EU responds to supply chain vulnerabilities revealed by the war in Ukraine, it seeks to develop alternative trade routes that circumvent both the Northern Corridor (via Russia) and the Red Sea route, which has become increasingly unstable due to risks such as Houthi attacks. In this context, the IDRP represents a land-based and secure corridor with enhanced strategic value.

In future phases, the IDRP is expected to integrate additional critical infrastructure, including hydrogen pipelines and parallel fiber-optic networks, positioning Iraq as a central node within the EU's long-term energy and digital connectivity frameworks (Development Corridors Partnership, 2022).

The Great Power Competition between Washington, Beijing, and Moscow

Although the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP) is physically located in the Middle East, it carries significant strategic implications for many global capitals. The project reflects the shifting dynamics of an evolving multipolar international system, where infrastructure increasingly symbolizes alliance configurations rather than merely economic calculations.

The United States: A Delicate Balancing Act

The IDRP presents a strategic dilemma for Washington. While the U.S. State Department has officially expressed support for "any initiatives to diversify Iraq's economy and enhance regional integration," this stance aligns with the broader U.S. strategic objective of diminishing Iraq's economic dependence on Iran. A wealthier and globally integrated Iraq is considered less likely to align with Tehran's orbit.

China: Pragmatism Over Rivalry

China's approach to the IDRP is characterized by what has been termed "complementary pragmatism" (Laron, 2025). Rather than positioning the IDRP as a rival to the BRI, Beijing interprets the project as a complement. The Chinese ambassador to Baghdad emphasized that the initiative is compatible with China's strategic interests.

This perspective is rooted in China's mercantilist logic. While Beijing supports BRI-aligned projects, its primary concern is the facilitation of Chinese trade. As the IDRP is financed by Gulf

states rather than Chinese state banks, it offers a debt-free route for Chinese exports, circumventing the reputational and political risks associated with debt-trap diplomacy.

Russia: The North-South Friction

Russia's flagship connectivity strategy—the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)—faces implicit competition from the IDRP. The INSTC is designed to move goods from Mumbai to Bandar Abbas and then northward through the Caspian region into Russia. In contrast, the IDRP creates a parallel vertical axis that entirely bypasses both Iran and Russia.

In the context of post-sanction geopolitics, Moscow seeks to preserve control over Eurasian transit routes and retain energy leverage over the European Union. A successful "Dry Canal" carrying Gulf gas to Europe would diminish Russia's strategic relevance. Hence, Russia's geopolitical alignment leans toward Iranian-supported corridors, which maintain the Heartland theory's emphasis on the centrality of Eurasia—even while maintaining cordial relations with Baghdad.

Europe's Strategic Autonomy: The Energy Battery of the Future

The Development Road is more than just a transit route for the European Union (EU); it may emerge as a crucial asset for its long-term vision of "strategic autonomy." Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, Brussels has intensified efforts to "de-risk" its supply chains and reduce dependency on Russian energy.

The "Global Gateway" Alignment

The IDRP is fully aligned with the EU's "Global Gateway" initiative, a €300 billion infrastructure plan intended to finance sustainable alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although the EU is not the main financial contributor to the IDRP, the corridor achieves one of the Gateway's central goals: securing resilient and politically independent supply chains (World Bank, 2024).

The Dry Canal as a Stability Belt

Europe perceives the IDRP as an opportunity to stabilize its southeastern frontier. By integrating the Iraqi economy into the European customs framework through Turkey, the EU aims to form a "prosperity belt" at the source of migration flows. In this context, the IDRP serves as a mechanism to reduce irregular migration by offering economic opportunities to the region's youth (Alaaldin, 2024).

Beyond Oil: The Hydrogen Horizon

The energy component of the IDRP is arguably its most forward-looking aspect. While short-term plans include transporting natural gas from the Gulf to Europe as a non-Russian alternative, the long-term strategy envisions Iraq as a “Green Energy Battery” for the continent. The corridor's integrated pipeline infrastructure could eventually be used to deliver green hydrogen generated via solar power in Iraq’s deserts, contributing significantly to the EU’s climate neutrality goals under the Green Deal.

Global Logistics and the “Red Sea Effect”

The Red Sea Crisis of 2023–2024 underscored the strategic urgency of the Development Road. Attacks on commercial vessels by Houthi forces in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait led to significant disruptions in global shipping via the Suez Canal. This resulted in extended delivery times (by 10–14 days) and a surge in maritime insurance costs (by 60%).

The Land Bridge Premium

In such a volatile maritime environment, the IDRP’s overland route offers a “chokepoint-free” alternative. Land corridors are generally easier to secure than naval shipping lanes, which are increasingly vulnerable to piracy, blockades, and asymmetric drone warfare. While the IDRP has its own land-based security concerns, it provides predictable “just-in-time” logistics for high-value and time-sensitive cargo such as electronics, pharmaceuticals, and automotive components.

The Resilience Premium

The emerging focus in logistics is not just speed or cost—but resilience. Supply chain planners are increasingly willing to pay a premium for a secure and stable route. The IDRP, which bypasses the unstable Red Sea and offers a ten-day advantage over the Suez Canal, fits this profile.

Competing with the Northern and Middle Corridors

Prior to 2022, the “Northern Corridor” via Russia (Trans-Siberian Railway) was the primary overland rail link between Asia and Europe. However, Western sanctions following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have rendered it largely inaccessible. The “Middle Corridor,” which traverses the Caspian Sea, is logistically complex due to multiple maritime-rail transitions.

The IDRP, in contrast, offers a seamless land corridor that avoids the geopolitical complications of Russia, Iran, and the Caspian bottleneck. It effectively positions itself as the only feasible “Southern Land Corridor” linking the Indo-Pacific economy (via Gulf ports) with the Atlantic economy (via Turkey and the EU) (Yıldız, 2024).

Conclusion

The Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP) constitutes far more than a national infrastructure initiative; it is a geopolitical intervention into the evolving architecture of the global economy. In an era defined by great power competition, the securitization of supply chains, and the global transition toward energy diversification, the "Dry Canal" emerges as a critical strategic asset. The IDRP functions simultaneously on multiple geopolitical registers: as a balancing mechanism for the United States to constrain Iranian regional influence; as a logistical complement to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), albeit financed through Gulf capital; and as a strategic lifeline for the European Union in its pursuit of energy autonomy and connectivity resilience. Perhaps most significantly, the IDRP offers Iraq an opportunity to transform its geopolitical identity—from a contested arena of proxy conflicts to a central node of international integration. In this sense, Iraq is attempting to reclaim sovereignty by capitalizing on its geographic position, converting location into leverage. Should the project succeed, it would affirm that in the 21st century, the most consequential borders are those that connect rather than divide nations.

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